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ABSTRACT

Crises intervention and prevention techniques developed by the Echo Glen Children's Center school in Washington are listed here, along with a description of climate improvement and problem-solving methods developed by the school's staff. The students in this special residential school are emotionally disturbed or socially maladjusted delinquent children. To give them feelings of success in the school environment, teachers are encouraged to show interest in students, to look for and reward appropriate behavior, to avoid the negative as much as possible, to individualize instruction, and to model appropriate behavior. A system of time-outs for disruptive students is used in lieu of traditional forms of punishment. Since students dislike being denied access to school, removing them for violent or unacceptable behavior encourages good behavior. (Author/DS)

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STRATEGIES FOR CRISES PREVENTION/INTERVENTION

Glen R. Webber

The kinds of experiences which I am going to talk about took place in a school which is much different than those with which most of you are familiar. I believe that you should all be aware of this kind of school and of the things it is trying to do. I also believe that many of the strategies and techniques which we use can be useful in the regular school programs.

So that you will be able to more fully understand our situation, I will tell you a little about our school.

The school is located on the grounds of Echo Glen Children's Center--a resident institution operated by the state of Washington for delinquent children. Thirty or forty years ago it would have been called a reform school, but it in no way resembles the old reform school.

The institution is coeducational. The residents are mostly of junior high school age. They live in cottages, each of which has sixteen individual rooms. They get three good meals each day and generally receive good professional care.

The location is about 25 miles east of Seattle in the foothills of the Cascade mountains. The buildings are esthetically pleasing and are situated in a beautiful natural setting. There are no walls or fences to keep the residents there.

The academic school program is administered and teachers are hired by a local school district. The school district is reimbursed by the state for all expenses plus a small management fee. The teaching staff enjoy a favorable student-teacher ratio. There is a wide variety of curricular offerings.

The school year is 220 days long.

New students arrive every week the year around. Turnover is constant.

The students are all juvenile delinquents, not status offenders. They have been convicted of all manner of offenses from larceny to homocide. They may have shot a parent, burned their school, or have a long history of petty crimes.

Most students can be described as being emotionally disturbed, socially maladjusted, or both.

Their values are far from those of the mainstream and their vocabularies contain many words which are not considered acceptable in polite society. Most of them have been kicked out of school or have been habitually truant.

They do not equate school with a feeling of success. There was very little in their previous school experiences that they found to be ego enhancing.

A student body made up entirely of such students creates a situation which is inherently negative. There are none of the stable, mature, positive students that are present in regular schools. This negativism must be overcome by the adults in charge. They must be careful not to be drawn into playing the students' games. Children in stress tend to create in others their own feelings and/or behavior. In dealing with agressiveness, adults must be careful that counter agression does not build up in them.

What are some of the kinds of crises that may be encountered in this situation? Planned group assault or runs, threatening, fighting, throwing objects (pencils, desks, etc.), kicking out doors, or windows, and disrupting class by any means--there is probably no method of attention getting that they have not tried.

Faced with this situation, the school staff needed to assess the options they had for preventing or taking care of such incidents.

We found very few options. The teachers could send students to the office. If the student committed some act such as throwing a book at the secretary or throwing a typewriter on the floor, he or she could be sent to the cottage. No corporal punishment is used and would not be effective in most cases anyway. The extreme punishment that can be used is isolation and this is very restricted.

Counseling is too rewarding to be used as an immediate intervention. Counseling is not effective when the clients are emotionally upset and, in many cases, could be perceived as a reward and thus could evoke the same kind of behavior at a later time.

We wanted to keep the students in school so we were faced with a need to develop a strategy to make them want to be in school.

The focus of our strategy was toward development of a positive school climate so that school would be a place where students could feel successful. Most of them had not been successful in many situations and least of all in school.

A report by Dr. Nathan Kaplan of the Institute of Research at the University of Michigan showed that the expectation of school failure was the most significant factor in the make up of delinquents, so we wanted to find ways to break the failure cycle.

It became obvious that our best approach would be to develop an overall strategy for prevention of incidents while developing techniques for intervening in day-to-day problems. Obviously, this kind of project required involvement of the entire teaching staff. The teachers were encouraged

-- to experiment to find what worked for them;

-- to share information (sharing is done freely and generously--it is recognized as a necessity for survival);

-- to show interest in students--a caring attitude;

-- to use planned and selective ignoring by not attending to all negative behaviors;

-- to look for and reward appropriate behavior;

-- to avoid the aversive as much as possible;

-- to individualize instruction; and

-- to model appropriate behavior.

Whenever new teachers were hired, they were carefully selected. We believe that we have a school staff that are humane, flexible, and will serve as good adult models.

Improvement of teacher morale became a primary goal of the school administration and toward this end we gave teachers constant support and encouragement. Teachers tried many different approaches such as operant conditioning, permissiveness, structure, positive peer culture, token economies, TA, TM, TET, etc. Much borrowing was done from Glasser, Bloom, Skinner, Hunter, and many lesser known experts.

We have now adopted a total school program which includes:

-- A grading system of P--Passing (large majority), EX-Excellent, and NC-No Credit to eliminate failure and unrealistically high grades.

-- Posting of clear, brief, and meaningful expectations in classrooms.

-- If students cannot handle the classroom, they are sent to the office for a ten-minute time out. If they handle the time out, they return to the room. If they cannot handle the office, they are sent to the cottage until the next period. The vast majority make it after the ten-minute time out.

In cases involving physical violence, they are removed from school until a conference can be held involving their cottage staff. The students dislike being denied access to school.

If students destroy property, they are required to make restitution from their accounts or to work off the debt.

-- Consequences are immediate and certain.

So much for the aversive interventions.

Most attention is given to appropriate behavior in the following positive ways:

-- Immediate verbal reinforcement (positive strokes).

-- Good work slips for five consecutive good days in class. These have intrinsic value to the students and can also be traded for certain tangible items at the school store.

-- Free time in the library, classroom, or cottage.

-- Awards assemblies where public recognition is given for achievement.

We look more for positive than for negative behavior. The opposite is too often true in schools and in society. People ususally ignore appropriate behavior and concentrate most of their energies attending to inappropriate behavior. This concerted effort toward the positive has given us a school climate in which students are able to make academic and social progress.

If this progress can be maintained long enough, the ego strength they gain can contribute significantly toward successful transition to community life including community school.

We hope that receiving schools will do all they can to give these kids a reasonable chance to survive.

While we know that our situation is different, we are convinced that efforts towards positive school climate will help any school.

Several public schools in the Puget Sound area are proving that this is true. In regular community schools, it is important to use students and parents in planning.

Every student who believes there is something for him or her in the school will behave better in class and will probably be a good-will ambassador for the school.

It is essential that all children find success in some activity at school. When students are successful, this means that teachers are successful too and the morale of both faculty and student body are enhanced.

A concerted effort toward recognition of appropriate behavior and playing down the inappropriate will improve the climate of any institution or organization.

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